

# What the Formalist Knows

The writings of Heinrich Wölfflin, and most particularly *The Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, are an explicit effort to found a discipline oriented to the history of art and to do so on the basis of an intuition that is recurrent in both art history and art criticism. Positions that make this intuition central to their conception of criticism and history are generally referred to as "formalist." Such positions have been the recurrent target of sustained and telling criticism, but no such criticism has been enough to simply and permanently close off formalism, in one form or another, as a fundamental option: whatever formalism's failings, it evidently registers a thought or feeling about art that does not stop claiming our interest. The question, then, is, what does the formalist know?

There are a number of answers to this question, in many cases offered by the champions of some particular formalism—there is, for example, Clive Bell's claim that "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions."<sup>1</sup> This formulation does not travel particularly well even within the general universe of formalisms; it's hard, for example, to imagine Wölfflin subscribing to it, but it does bring out well enough something of what we typically mean by formalism—a distinct interest in, say, the surface of a work of art as opposed to its presumed interpretive depths, as well as the assumption of a distinct (and likely primary) place in our dealings with such works for aesthetic considerations. This last feature suggests that formalist positions will tend to see history and criticism as closely related activities in a way that other visions of art history will not.

In general, formalist positions in art and art history seem to involve an insistence on one or more of the following points: (1) the primacy of the

visual in the experience of art; (2) the irreducibility of some notion of a "work" of art; (3) the necessity of criticism. While the movement from any one of these thoughts to the others looks in many ways obvious enough, it is a far harder matter to say how they might actually hang together, and indeed one way of sorting out the different positions we are inclined to recognize as formalist would be to pick out which of these formulations seems to be the operative core of the view.

Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*, defining the history of art as the history of vision, appears as formalist particularly in relation to the first of these points. An interest of this kind may be quite direct—it may make a claim about works of art as defined by particular arrangements of line and form and color, and this may or may not include a more particular theory about appropriate or inappropriate arrangements (the passage from Bell, like many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century central formalisms, appears to make a claim of this kind), or it may offer a more complex account of the scope and nature both of the visual and the interest or pleasure we take in it. The particular interest of Wölfflin's *Principles* arises to a high degree from the apparent centrality and complexity of his view of vision, a view that leads him to assert that it provides the essential object of the discipline:

Vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history.<sup>2</sup>

Making out the sense of this proposition is reason enough to be interested in reviewing Wölfflin's *Principles*, but there is a further, somewhat more oblique reason one might take an interest in reading or rereading Wölfflin now. Wölfflin's definitive disappearance from the foreground of academic art history's self-understanding—his being, as it were, dropped from the survey—appears to loosely coincide with a marked turn in the worlds of art and criticism, especially in the United States, against another "formalism," for the most part quite distinct from Wölfflin's and associated above all with the name of Clement Greenberg. Considering these two formalisms, and their fates, more or less alongside one another may be useful for gaining a deeper or sharper grasp of what it is the formalist claims to know, and it may also enable us to ask what it is that appears to be fading from view at the close of the 1960s—which is to say it may give some ways of thinking

about the relevance of a particular range of claims about modernism and postmodernism to the ways we imagine the shape of art history.

## PRINCIPLES

Wölfflin's brand of formalism appears somewhat peculiar because where formalisms typically tend toward an unified account of what we find visually or aesthetically pleasing, Wölfflin seems to offer an account of two wholly independent kinds—styles—of artistic work and achievement and then to yoke them somewhat arbitrarily into historical progression. The two kinds of achievement are distinguished as Classical and Baroque, and Wölfflin offers a set of five closely interlinked contrasts that allow one to pick out the fundamental differences between these two great styles. Long after *The Principles* itself has disappeared from the art history curriculum, the terms of these contrasts continue to circulate in the lectures and talk of art historians. The Classical is conjointly defined by the features Wölfflin picks out as linear, planar, closed, multiply unified, and absolutely clear, while the Baroque is defined by the painterly, recessive, open, unitary, and relatively clear. The historical thesis says that art develops from the Classical to the Baroque. An obvious analogy—Wölfflin doesn't hesitate to take up the invitation—is with language. French and English, like the Classical and the Baroque, are simply different: both are fully adequate to the world (there's nothing you can't say); each can be the medium of great art; and it would be both foolish and empty to imagine that one is "better" than the other, closer to some "essence" of language, and so on. At the same time, it's obviously a good thing to know what language you are speaking and what language is being spoken by those you are talking to or about; get this wrong and the conversation goes nowhere.

This analogy doesn't seem to help much with Wölfflin's apparent historical claims: it doesn't make sense to think that one language is somehow historically mandated to become another, and so it seems natural to downgrade this side of Wölfflin, to take what appear as claims about how art's history works as nothing more than fairly direct transcription of the actual sequence of Renaissance and Baroque and so devoid of any particular carry beyond those two periods. This would mean, of course, that *The Principles*

of *Art History* is not really that at all; the subtitle—*The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*—turns out to be a much more accurate indication of the book's actual scope and relevance.

As Wölfflin's willingness to take up the linguistic analogy suggests, it is not hard to find statements in *The Principles*—and certainly in a number of Wölfflin's other writings—that suggest he is deeply drawn to this understanding of his argument. Nonetheless, it's easy to demonstrate that it must be wrong, as well as that Wölfflin knows this, and knows it even during his moments of greatest attraction to the position we've just sketched.

Early on in *The Principles*, Wölfflin offers us the exemplary contrast of portraits by Dürer and Hals (figures 9 and 10). The specific contrast he is interested in here is that between linear and painterly, but the pair is fairly striking in terms of all Wölfflin's categories and offers a particularly good shape for the overall contrast between Classical and Baroque.



FIGURE 9. (left) Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Bernard von Reesen* (1521). Gemaeldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

FIGURE 10. (right) Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Young Man* (1646/1648). Andrew W. Mellon Collection. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.



FIGURE 11. (left) Martin Schongauer, *The Arrest of Christ* (1470–82). The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

FIGURE 12. (right) Albrecht Dürer, *The Arrest of Jesus Christ* (1510). Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Much later in the book Wölfflin offers a contrast between Dürer and his very close predecessor Martin Schongauer (figures 11 and 12).

As long we keep these two sets of examples insulated from one another, it will be easy to imagine that Wölfflin is giving us, as it were, a method for sorting images into two discrete piles, one Classical and one Baroque. But the moment we let the two pairs communicate with one another, we see a chain of contrasts—first Schongauer against Dürer, and then Dürer against Hals. In the second pair, Dürer clearly captures the force of Baroque painterliness against Schongauer's linearity, even as in the first pair all the features just assigned to the Dürer pass over to the Hals. In the one moment Dürer appears as Baroque, and in the other he has become Classical.



What has passed in front of us cannot be reduced to two kinds of images; instead we are witness to a peculiarly dynamic relation, a work of transformation in which it is not possible to say with any certainty who is speaking what language, the division between Classical and Baroque, and all their subjacent contrasts, passing in a sense directly through Dürer's art *itself*. One's hesitation over the word "itself" here reflects the way a given work has suddenly ceased to be a thing one can imagine characterizing adequately apart from any other work and instead appears and is characterizable only in relation to other works.

It's worth underlining several distinct features of this lesson. The first is that the Dürer does not begin as Classical—it only becomes Classical under the impress of the Hals—so our statement that "in the first moment Dürer appears as Baroque, and in the second he has become Classical" is accurate in linking a work's *appearing* to the Baroque and its historical fate to the

Classical. No work appears as (already) Classical; in this sense the Baroque always precedes the Classical and engenders the Classical as an effect.<sup>3</sup>

If we have lost one analogy with language (the idea that Classical and Baroque are simply like two different languages), here we gain a surprising access to a rather different analogy. But for this we need some preparation.

There are a significant number of well-known difficulties in imagining language as a directly human invention: one wants to imagine something like the "first speaker" pointing to the fire in the cave and saying "fire," and then everybody somehow catching on (much as Adam presumably pointed to his first bit of the world and named it). But if this is indeed to be the invention of language, it is hard to see how anyone knows (a) what the first speaker is pointing at (it doesn't have a name to single it out); (b) that the speaker's noise is a word (there haven't been any before); (c) why anyone should imagine there is any relation between the pointing and the noise made; and (d) how anyone has any basis for distinguishing that particular noise from any number of other more or less similar noises the first speaker may or may not make or have made on any number of other occasions that may or may not be or have been similar to this one. In brief, every time we haul up this picture of the first word, we seem condemned to assume that the whole of language is in some sense already in place. We think of such a moment in the same way that we can accurately and directly enough imagine some group of people deciding green lights will mean "go" and red lights will mean "stop." But they can come up with this arbitrary system of conventions because they already have the means of convening themselves. The question about the origin of language is how they came into possession of those means, how they came to inhabit such a universe.

Seeing these difficulties can lead one to prefer thinking of language as something discovered rather than invented.<sup>4</sup> The "first speaker" story becomes very different and rather more complicated, asking us to imagine now two languageless creatures moving across the world when one of them is startled by, let's say, a bolt of lightning striking relatively nearby and emits, in response, a shout of some kind. Several days later, the same two creatures, still languageless and roaming across the world, once again find themselves witness to a lightning bolt, now flashing down less surprisingly or less nearby—leading the one who did not cry out the first time to turn to the other, grinning, maybe gesturing, maybe giving a gentle nudge in the ribs, and repeating quietly that little startled cry. And this, it turns out,

counts as saying "lightning," something the first cry by itself did not do. In the grip of this story, we'll say that the first word—the one "said" on this second occasion, since nothing was "said" on the first—is a metaphor of some kind, repeating what was an expression of fear as an act of nomination, and at the same time it has as its effect the engendering of a literal meaning henceforth available to at least the two of them. It takes a bit of narrative to get this view out, but we in fact invent/discover language in this way all the time—every time the baby's mispronunciation becomes the family's word for the thing, or every time you and I turn a proper name or a phrase found in our shared experience into a general word or phrase for a certain kind of event or person. (For many years in my family, "vovo" was a standard way of designating the television set, and between my wife and me "up on the roof" is a lighthearted way of describing persons or propositions in, so to speak, deep trouble; from time to time we are reminded that we share this euphemism with an indeterminate community of other speakers similarly attached to the relevant joke. Punch lines can be like lightning bolts, just as metaphors can appear closely related to puns.)

The force of this analogy is to suggest that it's less a matter of Classical and Baroque each being like a language than it is a matter of their belonging to each other in something like the way in which meaning—literal and figurative—belongs to language. And much of the force of the analogy may lie in its ability to help one see just how deeply Wölfflin means it when he says that art's history is everywhere transformation, and proposes that such transformation has a specific shape—his preferred image here is a spiral—that makes history less one thing after another and more nearly one thing repeating another (the roots of this figure are, importantly, Hegelian). The analogy also may allow us to notice some features of Wölfflin's argument that he does not himself clearly catch. For example, if we return to our sequence of Schongauer-Dürer-Hals, we may now notice that as we move from the first pair to the second, the Schongauer in fact drops out, becomes invisible, much as the actual expression of sheer feeling that was the condition for its own subsequent transformation into—repetition as—language can be said to drop out in our language story.



Both the dynamic of Classical and Baroque and that of literal and figurative entail the vanishing of a more primitive moment on which they both depend (and which becomes “primitive” only as an effect of their emergence). A certain kind of retroaction is deeply built into both models—and seeing this should help with seeing why for Wölfflin the principles of art history are discoverable above all through a consideration of “later art.” To put it at its most extreme: there is for Wölfflin no such thing as “early art” (you don’t see what art is by looking at its first instances, which are, in themselves or by themselves, nothing—we may have cried out in shock or surprise on many occasions before one of those occasions become the site of language’s discovery).

When you project the Schongauer and the Dürer in the classroom and then click on the remote so the Schongauer goes away and the Hals appears in its stead, where has the Schongauer gone? One tempting answer here is to say that it's gone to another classroom where the conditions of visibility are distinctly different from those of the Wölfflinian art history class. Perhaps it has passed into Panofsky's room next door, and in doing so it has perhaps gained a meaning at the expense of its historical visibility. A more general answer might be that it has gone into the classroom that takes culture rather than art as its object, and if that answer seems worth pursuing, one of its promises may be that it offers a distinct way to imagine the relation between two disciplines distinguishable as "history of art" and "visual culture."

We may feel some discomfort with the thought that the Schongauer, which we know after all to be a work of art, has passed into visual culture. We will probably feel less uncomfortable if we rework our example so that it starts with, say, a medieval altarpiece—which we have some reason to think was cultural before it was art-historical. We may then feel that it is being more nearly returned to its "proper" position, and we may feel that still more strongly when we are asked to think about whether or how an African mask or an Indian temple might be an art-historical object. These are questions we feel, at best, clumsy in front of, not exactly sure what terms or arguments would be relevant to them. The suggestion that we may now be at least abstractly prepared for is that something in our picture of how disciplines have their objects may be responsible for some part of our difficulty.

We are, for example, strongly accustomed to thinking of objects and disciplines as distributed in a kind of intellectual space; the difficult prospect opened here is that disciplines might be distinguished by their temporal relation, by something like their differing tenses. What may be particularly striking in this instance is that terms we typically take to be very intimate with one another—art and culture, where we are likely to think of "art" as being contained in "culture" or perhaps representing its highest instance—now seem suddenly to diverge, to not belong to the same moment or to not share the same conditions of visibility. Where we have tended to think about what space a given object does or does not belong in—say, that of anthropology or that of the history of art—we may now want to find ways to talk sensibly and consequentially about the times of an object's visibility, its historicity.

The suggestion one might take from Wölfflin is that art is structurally "late," coming in one sense always after its own fact even as it also provides

the conditions under which that fact becomes visible. This would be to say that Wölfflin's historical thought is deeply oriented to the modern both as what breaks with or succeeds upon the traditional and as what obliges us to address tradition as such—an obligation we presumably do not feel when we live in the midst of tradition "itself." Of this last we may well be tempted to say that "in a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always being combined in something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other." What we, moderns, call "tradition" is, by contrast, the consequence of an explicit foregrounding of tradition that our historical consciousness—our modernity—imposes on us: "Historical consciousness," we'll say, "is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own." And having said these things, we may then find ourselves wanting to show that this modern, historical consciousness is "only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon it thus acquires."<sup>5</sup>

The voice we find ourselves speaking in here is Hans-Georg Gadamer's, working through the difference he takes Heidegger to make to the understanding of interpretation, and we've allowed ourselves to drift into it just in order to hear what it does and does not share with Wölfflin's. Among the elements shared we can pick out (1) a general refusal of method in favor of discovering principles for our activity inherent in our grasp or claim on an object; (2) a corresponding recognition that such principled objectivity opens the object to its ongoing historical transformation, with past and present inextricably entangled in our grasp; and (3) a concomitant recognition that our interpretive activity makes sense—is called for—only in relation to a fundamental break with a prior condition. But with this last, the differences also kick in: Gadamer, despite his many differences from Panofsky, holds on to the Panofskian notion that successful interpretation amounts to an overcoming of that break, whereas for Wölfflin that break is the inevitable and indefeasible consequence of the conditions under which we have an object at all. For Gadamer what finally and predominantly speaks in us is tradition; for Wölfflin it's more nearly the case that modernity itself becomes general, its difference found wherever we look, the absolute condition of our seeing.<sup>6</sup>

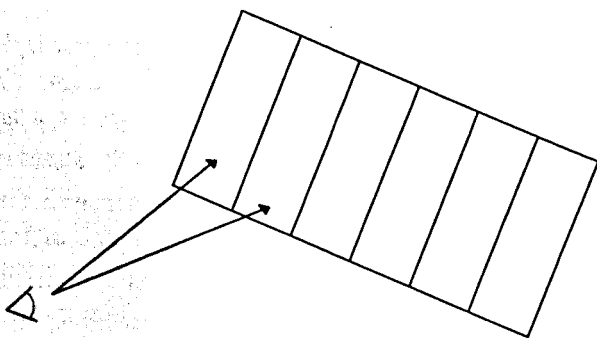
Gadamer is strongly associated with the thought that interpretation is, as is often said, "bottomless"—that is, there is no purely descriptive ground

on which interpretation might securely rest, and everything that might offer itself as such ground will be found to be itself already caught up in interpretation. It's in this light that he appears to offer a certain kind of radical alternative to Panofsky's much more constrained model of interpretation, Gadamer embracing the circularity Panofsky wants to hold at bay. Taking him up here, in the context of Wölfflin's *Principles*, one begins to see that what is actually at issue is not so much the bottomlessness of interpretation as the stability of the line we want to draw between description and interpretation. If we take Gadamer to be telling us simply that "it's all interpretation," we will end up imagining our activity in terms of a particular relation to meaning that will certainly vary somewhat according to how exactly we understand the consequences of Gadamer's argument but that will remain, above all, a relation to meaning. But if we take Gadamer to be saying something not about the impossibility of description but about the impossibility of fixing any line between it and interpretation, then we will realize that he might equally be teaching us something about the bottomlessness or endlessness of description. Seeing this, we may find ourselves compelled to say that the question Gadamer finally opens up is about the relation between the meaning of the object and the fact of its appearing. And this question is evidently the one that fundamentally shapes Wölfflin's *Principles*: "Yet an analysis with quality and expression as its objects by no means exhausts the facts. There is a third factor—and here we arrive at the crux of this inquiry—the mode of representation as such. Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times. Vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history."<sup>7</sup>

The passage we chart as we move in this way from Panofsky through Gadamer to Wölfflin is extraordinarily complex. It's one in which we see the bearing of theory shift from method to principle, the weight of our interest pass from interpretation to description, and the privileged locus of art-historical self-understanding move from the Renaissance to the modern. With this last the shape of art-historical time itself—what, so to speak, counts as "historical," how a term like "Renaissance" or "modern" even begins to mean—shifts as well. If we say that Wölfflin proposes an art history that finds its essential object in art's appearance, then we may also find ourselves both wanting and able to say that he offers a disciplinary model in which the discipline has its own limits as a problem—they too can only ever appear.

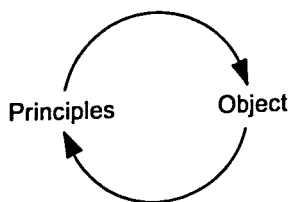
A certain interdisciplinarity—a relation to conditions that traverse the field as a whole—might then be one of its essential possibilities: it would be an effect of the terms through which Wölfflin's art history constitutes itself that they engender, at a place that appears both a limit and the heart of that discipline, an object that it is not proper to it, that demands another discipline and another set of principles—we can call this other discipline a version of "visual culture" that would be notably distinct from the "visual culture" that one might imagine as a generalization of Panofsky's iconology. Where a Panofskian turn toward visual culture at least seems to depend on nothing more than an expansion of the field of the given (Panofsky's art history has no constitutive stake in any particular notion of "art"), this Wölfflinian visual culture has everything to do with the specificity of the object that its principles both constitute and derive from, and it offers itself as at once an alternative to, a way on from, and an internal interference with art history "proper."<sup>8</sup> In posing the relation between "visual culture" and "art history" as a matter of conditions of visibility—of the relationship between slides that show and slides that do not show—we are suggesting that Wölfflin's concern for "the mode of representation as such" is not simply one that arises within his art history but one that is constitutive of it and of its relation to its limits.

It should be apparent by this point that Wölfflin places an unusual pressure on the ways we most standardly imagine the general shape of disciplinary knowledge. We've noted, for example, that the picture of fields of knowledge lying more or less alongside one another in some general space doesn't work well here; we've been forced as well to distinguish sharply between "method" and "principle"; and we've been led to phrase the relationship between a field and its limits in unusual and somewhat obscure ways. Some pictures may help us sort through some of this.



This picture is intended to bring out some of the features we ordinarily assume in talking about knowledge. It gives us a subject facing a field of objects that can be divided into kinds, thus giving rise to a series of discrete fields of study. It is, at least at this level, not important how "natural" or "arbitrary" the divisions within the field are, nor is it important how sharply drawn the lines between them are. It is, however, important that there are boundaries, that they are, in principle, distinguishable from the fields they mark off, and that in relation to those fields they mark the particular place where the question of interdisciplinarity arises. Because the subject faces the object, it is possible to raise a question about how the subject is related to that object, about what guarantees there might or might not be that the subject has a good view of it, and so on; these will appear as questions of, above all, method. We've seen, of course, a particular version of this at work in Panofsky's constitution of art history and seen how he makes that question of method turn through the particular matter of perspective (a figure whose naturalness is apparent in this picture).

Over and against this, Wölfflin appears to be appealing to an older and much more suspect model of disciplinarity—an Aristotelian model in which "principles" are said to derive from an "object" that those principles also pick out. The suspicion brought crushingly to bear on this model by the emergence of modern science is that it is circular and thus empty.<sup>9</sup> To take a much used and abused example, to explain why opium makes us sleepy by saying that it possesses a "dormitive principle," is to explain nothing at all.<sup>10</sup> A picture for this kind of discipline might look something like this:



This certainly makes explicit the circularity of this kind of "explanation." Particularly coming so hard on the heels of a much more familiar picture, it also invites certain kinds of misreading. We are likely, for example, to take

it that the discipline lies in some sense inside the curving lines that would then demarcate its boundary, but that's clearly wrong (those lines just are the field). We are likely also to take those lines as the means by which object and viewer or subject are attached to one another, but that's also and equally clearly wrong (the viewer or subject is a precipitate of those principles and has no existence apart from them). In fact, there's nothing in this diagram that really answers very well to what we would want to call "the outside" of the field—nothing that answers to our comfort with saying that any one of the fields represented in the earlier diagram lies both outside and alongside another. There's a strong sense in which we would be right to say that outside of the movement there is nothing, and most particularly there is neither subject nor object. But we would be right also to say that it is distinctly a delimited field and that "outsidedness" is not foreign to it. The problem is that we don't find that outsidedness where we usually look for it. We get closer, perhaps, to what we want to say here if we turn ourselves at, so to speak, right angles to the diagram and say that "the outside" just is the white page or ground on or against which object and principle emerge. This at least offers to get at the way in which the limits of a field of this kind are not localized as its edges but are a continuous feature or dimension of it, a condition of its appearance.

If these pictures get the general shape of Wölfflin's activity about right, we will no doubt have further questions about its details; in particular, we will want to know what, if anything, saves it from sleepy triviality. But before launching ourselves back into Wölfflin's text, we might draw at least two preliminary morals.

The first is that arguments that pass back and forth across these two highly general pictures of knowledge will be prone to various forms of misreading and misunderstanding. For example, if we are committed to the first picture, we will tend to see people hewing to the second as offering a peculiar, probably untenable, license to subjectivity (and those people will, in turn, genuinely not know what we are talking about—subjects in the relevant sense do not exist for them). Conversely, if we are committed to the second picture, we will see people operating in the first as engaged in an activity that will strike us as both senseless and deeply peculiar (we'll feel as if they imagine themselves acting in a place they cannot possibly occupy, a place somehow both outside of the world and nonetheless having it in view, Mars perhaps), and we'll be able to make some kind of peace with them only when we find

ourselves able to understand their detachment in more worldly terms (as, for example, a peculiar mode of attachment). These are two different kinds of pictures. They do not show what they show in the same way.

The second moral is much more briefly stated: at least in Wölfflin's case, it looks hard, if not impossible, to pry what the formalist knows apart from how it is known.

### APPEARING

In focusing the first part of this chapter on questions about the disciplinary shape and implication of Wölfflin's *Principles*, we have somewhat skirted the directly visual emphases that undergird the description of his art history as "formalist." In this register Wölfflin offers first of all a vocabulary intended to enable a certain level of description—the well-known pairs linear/painterly, planar/recessive, closed/open, multiplicity/unity, and absolute/relative clarity. In each instance the first term of the contrast offers to open up an aspect of the Classical and the second the corresponding aspect of the Baroque. Wölfflin also offers a general characterization of the underlying sense of these linked contrasts—the Classical terms reflect a tactile or haptic orientation to things as opposed to the Baroque orientation to the optical. As he puts it, in one mood, "They are two conceptions of the world, differently orientated in taste and in their interest in the world, and yet each capable of giving a perfect picture of visible things."<sup>11</sup> Statements of this kind—the kind that suggest Classical and Baroque stand to one another as French and English do—can frequently be countered by other statements elsewhere in the book that either invite other analogies for their relationship (like "literal" versus "rhetorical") or raise a question of "value" that sits uneasily at best with the claim that the two representational modes are equally adequate to the world. Some of these moments of self-contradiction or uneasiness are right on the surface, inviting us to play one formulation off against another. Others are a bit more buried, at work within single sentences or paragraphs, and to a degree dependent on the reader's capacity to catch the force of some particular formulation—as, for example, when he writes in discussing the various aspectual transitions from Classical to Baroque, "The transition from tangible, plastic, to purely visual, painterly perception follows a natural logic, and could not be reversed. Nor could the transition from tectonic to a-tectonic, from the rigid to the free conformity to law."<sup>12</sup> The last phrase

here—"free conformity to law"—is an all but direct quotation from Kant on the beautiful, and when one registers that note in the passage (no doubt reinforced both by the earlier invocation of the "purely visual" and by a more obscure sense that painting and the painterly are tied up in all this), one will likely feel that the tactile and the optical are not simply equally valid alternatives but that the optical has a certain aesthetic privilege for Wölfflin—that a "more visual" visual art is better than a "less visual" visual art. But of course one will also wonder what "a 'more visual' visual art" really is. Are we supposed to think that one painting might be more visible than another? Don't we always see all there is to see?

Some of Wölfflin's sentences and paragraphs can feel as if they are almost wholly driven by these kinds of contradiction or uncertainty. Take for example this paragraph:

Let us try to sift out these basic forms in the domain of more modern art. We denote the series of periods with the names Early Renaissance, High Renaissance, and Baroque, names which mean little and must lead to misunderstanding in their application to south and north, but are hardly to be ousted now. Unfortunately, the symbolic analogy bud, bloom, decay, plays a secondary and misleading part. If there is in fact a qualitative difference between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the sense that the fifteenth had gradually to acquire by labor the insight into effects which was at the free disposal of the sixteenth, the (classic) art of the Cinquecento and the (baroque) art of the Seicento are equal in point of value. The word classic here denotes no judgment of value, for baroque has its classicism too. Baroque (or, let us say, modern art) is neither a rise nor a decline from classic, but a totally different art. The occidental development of modern times cannot simply be reduced to a curve with rise, height, and decline: it has two culminating points. We can turn our sympathy to one or to the other, but we must realize that that is an arbitrary judgment, just as it is an arbitrary judgment to say that the rose-bush lives its supreme moment in the formation of the flower, the apple-tree in that of the fruit.<sup>13</sup>

Some of this perhaps stands now in sharper relief than it might have on first reading—Wölfflin's deep unhappiness with the very idea of a "period," and maybe also the ease with which he is willing to gloss "Baroque" with "modern." The main thrust of the paragraph is easy enough to pick out and paraphrase: while it is true that the sixteenth century can do some things the fifteenth

couldn't just because the fifteenth century worked through those things, this doesn't make sixteenth-century art better than fifteenth-century art.

But that paraphrase doesn't get at how Classic and Baroque play into the argument or enter into the sentence towing "value" along with them. When we try to add that into our understanding of the sentence, then the bit about the sixteenth century standing, familiarly enough, on the shoulders of the fifteenth seems no longer exactly to the point. It's what doesn't hold together here that then seems to produce the immediately following sentences—the first saying, evidently, that "Classic" implies no particular value, because Baroque can be Classic too (but of course here "Classic" precisely is a value), and the next sentence proceeding to break apart the very things its messy predecessor had tangled together, the Baroque suddenly no longer having in any sense its classicism but being "a totally different art."<sup>14</sup> It's just not clear what Wölfflin means here; the paragraph seems driven by a thought it perhaps enacts or betrays but does not manage to state. Jean-Luc Nancy can seem to be struggling with the same point when he writes, in "The Vestige of Art," "The history of art is a history that withdraws at the outset and always from the history or historicity that is represented as process or as 'progress.' One could say: art is each time radically *another art* (not only another form, another style, but another 'essence' of 'art'), according to its 'response' to another world, to another *polis*; but it is at the same time each time *all* that it is, *all art* such as in itself finally . . ."<sup>15</sup>

Wölfflin's next paragraph returns to the question of periods and eventually works its way back to what must be his core point about such historical shapes as "periods" and must also be central to the previous paragraph's struggle with itself: "Of course, in the strictest sense of the word, there is nothing 'finished': all historical material is subject to continual transformation; but we must make up our minds to establish the distinctions at a fruitful point, and there let them speak as contrasts, if we are not to let the whole development slip through our fingers."<sup>16</sup> This surely is what Wölfflin most fully means, and seeing that is useful in diagnosing the earlier paragraph's difficulties: as if a particular picture of what a period and a style must be interferes with his ability not only to lay out what he means but also to say why it matters, what kind of stake informs history understood this way. But one may also feel that although this helps explain the difficulties the remarks about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries got into, there's still something to be caught about the particular turns that express that difficulty (we may

have a better view of the difficulty and so a better view of the terms at play in it, but there's something about how just these sentences express that difficulty that continues to elude us).

Here a quick glance in what may at first seem a rather surprising direction—toward the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and particularly his famous letter to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff—may help snap Wölfflin's difficult sentences into focus:

We learn nothing with more difficulty than to freely use the national. And I believe that it is precisely the clarity of presentation that is so natural to us as is for the Greeks the fire from heaven. . . .

It sounds paradoxical. Yet I argue it once again and leave it for your examination and use: in the progress of education the truly national will become the ever less attractive. Hence the Greeks are less master of the sacred pathos, because to them it was inborn, whereas they excel in their talent for presentation, beginning with Homer, because this exceptional man was sufficiently sensitive to conquer the Western Junonian sobriety for his Apollonian empire and thus to veritably appropriate what is foreign. . . .

Yet what is familiar must be learned as well as what is alien. This is why the Greeks are so indispensable for us. It is only that we will not follow them in our own national [spirit] since, as I have said the free use of what is one's own is the most difficult.<sup>17</sup>

The first question, really answerable only by ear, is whether one can indeed hear this passage at work within Wölfflin's. An affirmative answer will turn to some degree on Hölderlin's repeated "free use" in relation to Wölfflin's "free disposal," on some recognition that Hölderlin's linkage of that phrase to "the national" and Wölfflin's use of it in relation to periodicity are looped through each other (so the Greek and German in Hölderlin are also ancient and modern, just as fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Wölfflin are also south and north<sup>18</sup>) and a broader recognition of a rhythm or periodicity common to their central sentences.

Hölderlin is a complex case—a pivotal figure at the origins of both German romanticism and German idealism, student friend of Hegel's, incarcerated for mental illness most of his long life, and recovered for German literary history only in the twentieth century. Wölfflin certainly belongs to his early audience, as does Martin Heidegger. Heidegger and his followers have made much of the passage we've quoted. That passage gives voice to one deep motif in Hölderlin—the thought that one discovers home only in mov-

ing away from it, because at home one's home is in some sense concealed from oneself (the Greeks' being outwardly what the Germans are inwardly can discover to the Germans what they, on their own, cannot know but can only be). And this is a motif that can seem to be enacted also in Dürer's movement back and forth over the Alps—as if Italy was what allowed Dürer to return to a place he had never been. Or should we read these journeys as Panofsky does, with Dürer as the means through which southern humanist culture establishes and in a certain sense perfects itself in the north? The question alone is enough to give us a strong sense of what was at stake for Panofsky in recapturing Dürer from Wölfflin (and so also why and how Dürer repeatedly shows up at crucial moments in such key early essays as "Perspective as Symbolic Form" or "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions . . .").<sup>19</sup>

Does this long excursus help us with the questions we've been trying to raise about the visual in Wölfflin and the deep shape of his formalism? Does Wölfflin perhaps think that vision works like this—that seeing is, say, a continuing "return" to a place one has yet to inhabit?

Wölfflin's fullest glosses on tensions that structure his object suggest that he does indeed think something of this sort:

We must go back to the fundamental difference between draughtsmanly and painterly representation as even antiquity understood it—the former represents things as they are, the latter as they seem to be. This definition sounds rather rough, and to philosophic ears, almost intolerable. For is not everything appearance? And what kind of a sense has it to speak of things as they are? In art, however, these notions have their permanent right of existence. There is a style which, essentially objective in outlook, aims at perceiving things and expressing them in their solid, tangible relations, and conversely, there is a style which, more subjective in attitude, bases the representation on the *picture*, in which the visual appearance of things looks real to the eye, and which has often retained so little resemblance to our conception of the real form of things.<sup>20</sup>

We have a habit of thinking of progress in knowledge as involving a continuing passage beyond mere appearance that moves us ever closer to the real state of things. Wölfflin seems, in marked contrast, to be suggesting that art is motivated by the felt need to get past our knowledge of the world and, as it were, back to mere appearance, which has also not yet happened or which

we have not yet found our way to inhabit: "A more developed art has learned to surrender itself to mere appearance. With that, the whole notion of the pictorial has shifted. The tactile picture has become the visual picture—the most decisive revolution which art history knows."<sup>21</sup>

We may remain—Wölfflin himself evidently remains—a bit undecided whether this "revolution" is a particular event within a larger history of art (a revolution like the one in France or the one that was to deliver us from capitalism) or is in fact the permanent object of art history, what it finds wherever it looks, the revolution of a wheel that does not cease turning. It's worth reading the whole of the paragraph that Wölfflin produces as a gloss on the assertion just quoted:

Now we need not, of course, immediately think of the ultimate formulations of modern impressionist painting if we wish to form an idea of the change from the linear to the painterly type. The picture of a busy street, say, as Monet painted it, in which nothing whatsoever coincides with the form which we think we know in life, a picture with this bewildering alienation of the sign from the thing is certainly not to be found in the age of Rembrandt, but the principle of impressionism is already there. Everybody knows the example of the turning wheel. In our impression of it, the spokes vanish, and in their place appear indefinite concentric rings, and even the roundness of the felly [rim] has lost its pure geometric form. Now not only Velasquez, but even so discreet an artist as Nicolas Maes has painted this impression. Only when the wheel has been made indistinct does it begin to turn. A triumph of seeming over being.<sup>22</sup>

The English translation both suppresses some notable features of the German text and places in still greater relief the relation between the revolution that constitutes art history's object and the revolving wheel as a paradigmatic painterly object.<sup>23</sup> Between the German and the English one knows exactly neither where to stop reading nor how to continue, as if just here one is at the very heart of a complex figurative knot outside of which Wölfflin's art history is unthinkable, objectless. One can think of this knot as composed of several interlacing circles—one described by the play between things as they are and things as they appear, one described by a quasi-Aristotelian disciplinary movement from object to principles and back, and one linked to the loosely Hegelian thought of history as spiraling repetition. One may also want to think of the interlacing of these circles as what keeps any one



FIGURE 13. Diego Rodríguez Velázquez, *The Spinners, or the Fable of Arachne* (1657?). Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

of them from being merely circular and closed on itself, thus defining the essential structure and limits of art-historical showing.<sup>24</sup>

If we return now to the particular linguistic analogy that proved productive earlier, we will be tempted to say that there is a strong sense in which this knot is, in effect, the consequence of what Wölfflin implicitly takes as the deep rhetoricity of vision, a continual passage within it between what in language we distinguish as the literal and the figural. Presumably the background imagination here would be of a purely animal vision that neither knows its objects nor worries about their appearance. The theory that we, both following and pushing the *Principles*, seem committed to is that we get to literal vision—seeing things as they are—only by virtue of a prior figurative moment ungraspable as such in its moment of first appearance. Just as our theory of language says there is not, in the first instance, a literal language that later gains a certain rhetorical capacity, so our Wölfflinian theory of vision says there is not first of all a literal seeing that subsequently gains some further capacity not essentially linked to it. In each case, we will want to say that what we take to be prior is in fact an effect of what seems

to follow: human seeing “begins” with painting, the way “lightning” begins with its poetic announcement. And of course we may suspect that this is no longer simply a matter of analogy—we may now want to say that human seeing is vision under the condition of language, is the seeing proper to a being that speaks, and that art’s special knowledge is of that fact. What the formalist—Wölfflin, in any case—knows is that art appears.

### EXPERIENCE

In an often-cited essay from 1960, the critic Clement Greenberg offered a general account of his position on modern art, and more particularly modernist painting. The position is widely and appropriately understood as “formalist,” both in the sense that is strongly oriented to the visual dimensions of the work of art and in the sense that it places critical judgment squarely in the foreground. Greenberg’s formalism has, on the face of it, little to do with Wölfflin’s. Wölfflin is mentioned once relatively early in Greenberg’s writings (the reference does little more than mark the occasion of the art historian’s death in 1946), and there’s some reason to think Greenberg may have looked again at Wölfflin in the early 1960s, but beyond the shared opposition between the optical and the tactile, there’s little evidence of any crucial influence from, sustained engagement with, or even any continuing interest in Wölfflin. “Modernist Painting” does make an argument about the difference between Modernist and “Old Master” painting that can seem in some ways reminiscent of what we’ve seen in the *Principles*—“Whereas one tends to what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first”<sup>25</sup>—but the relation is loose at best, and the formulation here particularly flat-footed. This flat-footedness troubles the essay throughout in a variety of ways—for example, this particular sentence is immediately followed by a considerable qualification: “This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism’s success in doing so is a success of self-criticism.”<sup>26</sup> “Self-criticism” as it figures here is the presiding term for the essay as a whole. As Greenberg famously puts it in the opening paragraph: “I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist.”<sup>27</sup>

The essay draws a sharp distinction between external criticism and self-criticism, and takes it that the essential drive of self-criticism is toward a "purification" of whatever practice engages in it. In the case of painting, this, Greenberg believes, leads it to orient itself above all to the flatness that defines it over and against every other art. By 1960, Greenberg's influential account was already beginning to be the object of what eventually became sustained criticism on a variety of grounds, most notably its presumed "reductionism." More importantly for us, it was also beginning to undergo its own internal crisis, largely set off by Frank Stella's Black Paintings of the previous year, which were to prove massively significant both for the course of American art in the 1960s and for Greenberg's criticism.

The reference to Kant is worth pausing over, because it is one of a number of such remarks that play into the common characterization of Greenberg's position as a specifically "Kantian" formalism. But where Wölfflin's "free conformity to law" is in fact a direct, if concealed, citation of Kant on the beautiful, Greenberg's reference is not to the *Critique of Judgment* but to the *First Critique* with its assertion that ours is peculiarly an age of criticism in which all modes of thought—and most notably reason itself—are called to self-examination in order to secure their claims. This means, among other things, that "criticism" as Greenberg uses it here does not connect so much with the *Third Critique*'s claim that of taste there can only be criticism and not a theory<sup>28</sup> as with the very different sense of criticism as precisely the submission of one or another claim to explicit standards of argument or proof (this is presumably why Greenberg later in the essay links "self-criticism" to "scientific method"). It's clear that Greenberg means us to take "self-criticism" as something other than criticism in this sense—it is said to be "immanent," to work from "the inside," and to do so "through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized"—but his control over this contrast seems at best intermittent. And this means that his control over crucial terms grammatically linked to "criticism" and "self-criticism" in the essay suffers from the same intermittence. A particularly important instance is the word "standards," which moves back and forth between naming something like a set of rules or criteria, and meaning (as, it is tempting to say, it both must mean and does not quite manage to unequivocally mean in the essay's closing sentence<sup>29</sup>) just those exemplary and theoretically unmasterable works that are art's history and its only standards. What's at stake here is something Greenberg most usually refers to as "the experience of art."

This is most often and directly in Greenberg what we have before a work of art—what something claiming to be a work of art either offers or fails to offer to its viewer. But it might also be taken as—and Greenberg sometimes strongly advances it as—something the work itself might be said to have (or not have); this is evidently how it means it in the important early essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” when he writes that “kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations,”<sup>30</sup> as if the work itself claimed to have lived something it has in fact not lived or claimed to make its own something it has in fact never had. These two formulations offer significantly different ways of defining experience, and the second is the more difficult insofar as it evidently takes it that what befalls one might not be experience apart from one’s owning of it. These are the fundamental stakes beneath the crisis of Greenbergian formalism; they are visible in Greenberg’s writings from the outset, and those writings mean to alert us to the possibility of such a crisis (that we no longer know what to make of our experience, do not know well what counts as experience) even as they also play their own part in precipitating it (that is, they have from the beginning a way of forgetting or misphrasing the fundamental intuitions they draw on).

Reprinting “Modernist Painting” in 1978, by which time Greenberg was firmly situated in the contemporary art world as the old demon still not fully suppressed and so still fighting back, he felt compelled to add a postscript, which reads in part:

I want to take this chance to correct an error, one of interpretation and not of fact. Many readers, though by no means all, seem to have taken the “rationale” of Modernist art outlined here as representing a position adopted by the writer himself: that is, that what he describes he also advocates. This may be the fault of the writing or the rhetoric. Nevertheless, a close reading of what he writes will find nothing at all to indicate that he subscribes to, believes in, the things that he adumbrates. (The quotation marks around *pure* and *purity* should have been enough to show that).<sup>31</sup>

As self-justification this is, at best, disingenuous. It is simply true that Greenberg was both as a critic and, by all evidence, as a person fiercely prescriptive. It is nonetheless also true that for much of his career Greenberg tried to draw a sharp distinction between his judgments and the various forms of larger historical or theoretical sense he thought they could bear; the former were presumably things he would stand by and the latter defen-

sible only insofar as they remained responsive to the judgments that blazed a trail they were obliged only to follow. As a practical matter, it's hardly surprising that the barrier between these two eventually broke down; one might even find the ambition to make judgments without inheriting the sense one makes of them humanly peculiar.

What makes this postscript worth attending to is the way Greenberg moves to lay the blame for his misunderstanding on something he calls "the writing or the rhetoric," as if it were a matter of something he had done wrong or could at least have done better. But he then immediately (and not terribly surprisingly) about-faces and lays the blame, with increasing vehemence, on the reader's failure to attend to his text. These are maneuvers sufficiently familiar to anyone who has ever been caught up in his or her own moments of self-justification or denial as not to need any particular explanation—instances of what Freud calls "the logic of the kettle"<sup>32</sup>—but that should not wholly blind us to the things Greenberg is right about. He's right, for example, that *pure* and *purity* are regularly written within quotation marks. He's right also when he says, somewhat later in his postscript, that he never exactly meant "flatness" as an aesthetic criterion; the qualifications are right there in "Modernist Painting."<sup>33</sup>

Is there then no problem with "the writing or the rhetoric," just a lot of lazy readers? And what about those quotation marks on *pure*? Is it enough to say that readers have not adequately attended to them, or do we have to ask what equipment, if any, Greenberg has provided his readers that would permit them to attend to them in an appropriate and consequential way? Do we have to ask how far Greenberg himself has attended to them and in what way? These are the kinds of quotation marks that are generally referred to as "scare quotes,"<sup>34</sup> and at least some part of what that means is that we do not know exactly what they mark. Greenberg might be citing a sort of generalized modernist discourse, and then we'd probably want to know why such citation is not a deeper and more sustained feature of his writing. He might be ironizing the term, and then we'd probably want to know where he stands when this term is subject to such treatment. He might be using these marks to keep the reader from asking questions about the word they contain (they mean to scare you off), or he might be using them because he does not know whether or how he means the word inside them (and so he's the one who is scared).

When we look over this range of choices, it is deeply tempting to see these

quotation marks as marking—being precipitated out of—a more general rhetoricity that Greenberg's writing finds itself able to neither adequately acknowledge nor simply evade. Surrounding *purity*, they would be at once essential to what Greenberg means to say (that is, he does not mean *purity*) and the alibi for his failure to say what he does mean.

What we've been loosely tracking as tensions internal to Greenberg's writing open out in the late 1960s into a particularly complex knot in the writings of a figure often seen as Greenberg's closest follower but who is in many ways also his sharpest critic. Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" is widely (and rightly) read as an assault on a particular strand of art emergent in the United States in the 1960s and now most often referred to as "Minimalism." But in being that, it is also a particular internal argument with Greenberg. The connection between the two arguments is difficult and crucial.

At the outset, Fried picks out the general body of work he means to address by listing a number of then-current designations—Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, and Specific Objects—and then moves to offer his own designation, "literalist art." He offers no particular justification for this phrase, and most readers are tempted to connect it to the argumentative fabric of the essay in a number of presumably overlapping ways. It is, for example, introduced hard on the heels of an opening characterization of the work in question as "largely ideological," seeking "to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words and has in fact been so formulated by a number of its practitioners";<sup>35</sup> "literal" taken in this light would be very close to "literary," a standard Greenbergian way of describing a certain kind of artistic failure endemic to modernism in the visual arts (Surrealism would be the prime instance of a body of artistic work undone by an essential literariness). But this declaring and occupying of a position turns out, as the essay unfolds, to describe what Fried takes to be a major feature of the work utterly apart from the formulations with which the artists may also have surrounded it: Minimalist work is, Fried and the artists agree, characterized to a high degree by the simple fact of its taking—claiming—a place in the gallery such that the work presents itself as the center of a situation, and here "literal" would seem to capture the blunt, obdurate, more or less opaque presence of an object that apparently means to be nothing more or other than an object. Readers may come to feel that Fried's usage is also motivated, or at least justified, by what he sees as a cer-

tain literal-mindedness in its practitioners; this is somewhat harder to pin down, but one might note, for example, the way they seem to feel that "anthropomorphism" in sculpture can be avoided simply by making things that don't look like (don't physically remind us of) people; Fried clearly takes this as a sort of literal-minded failure to understand what anthropomorphism is and why it might or might not represent a risk or threat for sculpture. This very particular charge can be linked up to a larger worry that runs all through the essay. Early on, he puts it this way: "From its inception, literalist art has amounted to something more than an episode in the history of taste. It belongs rather to the history—almost the natural history—of sensibility, and it is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition. Its seriousness is vouched for by the fact that it is in relation to both modernist painting and modernist sculpture that literalist art defines or locates the position it aspires to occupy."<sup>36</sup>

Fried doesn't do anything further in the essay with this passage's pause between "history" and "natural history," but we may be tempted to take a natural history to be one in which experience is somehow natural, thus given and not in need of any particular having. This notion of literalism as a kind of sensibility returns later in the essay in a particularly interesting form: "Literalist sensibility is, therefore, a response to the *same* developments that have largely compelled modernist painting to undo its objecthood—more precisely, by the same developments *seen differently* . . ."<sup>37</sup> The clear invitation here is to imagine two artists walking through the same museum (we can probably be even more concrete here: walking through New York's Museum of Modern Art in particular), taking in the same works, and yet one of them is taking them in somehow wrongly. That wrongness will result in, or be continued as, her making the work that "Art and Objecthood" attacks. "Literalism" would be a name for that wrongness, both in the work and in the encounter with the work in the museum.

If we adjust the picture just a bit—imagine our two artists now not in the museum but reading Clement Greenberg's criticism—we'll be tempted to say that they make a certain kind of reading mistake: they take Greenberg literally. And with this our focus in the essay shifts and sharpens, and we begin to see how the attack on a particular strain of art is necessarily an attack also on Greenberg—as if literalist art forced into visibility a fault line running through Greenberg's writings, sometimes appearing as a problem with Greenberg's "theory" and sometimes as a problem in its expression.

The way in which "Art and Objecthood" has both Minimalism and Greenberg in joint critical view is perhaps nowhere more clearly signaled than in the text's generally approving citation of Greenberg, to which is then appended an extended footnote that voices "certain qualifications" that are, in fact, absolutely fundamental and amount to the assertion of a deep break with Greenberg.

When we get the argumentative scope of the essay right in this way, a number of its most prominent features come much more clearly into view. One might instance in particular its fundamental reliance on nothing more than Fried's own experience of the work and his implicit playing that off against something Tony Smith offers as an account of an experience formative for his art; here the argument is evidently about what in fact counts as an experience—what it is or means to have an experience, what it might be or mean to fail to have one's own experience. But these are also exactly the terms Greenberg had put in play in his early writings, and they are terms one can imagine as deeply at stake in the activity we call "reading Greenberg," particularly as it is given flesh in the unusually complex act of criticism "Art and Objecthood" is.

It's not to our purpose here to pursue this reading in any further detail. It's enough for us to take away a couple of points that seem to knit up fairly closely with what we've also seen in Wölfflin: first, that there is a rhetoricity deeply at work within our encounters with works of art, and second, that this imposes a certain complexity on our imaginations of art's history such that it is always possible to find ourselves standing wrong way round within it, closed to art's appearing and so also closed against the ongoing work of transformation that is art's historical being. We can be insured against such risk only at the cost of our actual object, and we are accordingly obliged to the full difficulty of our modernity. We've seen Jean-Luc Nancy providing a sort of gloss on these issues in Wölfflin; here it may be useful to hear a bit of Stanley Cavell, Fried's closest intellectual interlocutor in the 1960s: "When there was a tradition, everything which seemed to count did count. (And that is perhaps analytic of the notion of 'tradition.'). . . . The [modernist] problem is that I no longer know what a sculpture is, why I call *any* object, the most central or traditional, a piece of sculpture."<sup>38</sup>

A second remarks puts in the starkest possible terms what it is to take fully seriously the further thought that our access to art's appearing does

not go apart from the hazarding of our words and experience. The critic, Cavell writes, is

part detective, part layer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike, and in which the public not only, therefore, confuses one with the other, but does not know that one or the other has been committed: not because the news has not got out, but because what counts as one or the other cannot be defined until it happens; and when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a crime or glory of his own.<sup>39</sup>

### ENVOI

This exploration of formalism has turned out to be also an investigation into a distinctively modernist objectivity that is significantly vexed and difficult. The difficulties here are neither merely academic nor methodological; on the accounts we've explored they are difficulties in experience—in our capacity or willingness for it, our expressive or writerly patience with it—and they are deeply bound up with the conditions of art's appearance. One outcome of this may then be a further question about whether our current imagination of the circumstances of art and theory alike as "postmodern" works more nearly toward a fuller acknowledgment of such objectivity or as a mode of its dissolution.

- by Ludwig Binswanger, see Michael P. Steinberg, "Aby Warburg's Kreuzlingen Lecture: A Reading." Warburg gave the lecture in the asylum as proof that he had recovered.
81. Michael Ann Holly, "Interventions: The Melancholy Art," and the accompanying responses.
  82. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249.
  83. Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," 24.
  84. In her tribute to Warburg, his friend and assistant Gertrud Bing notes that Darwin on the emotions was important for Warburg, as was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's essay "Laocoön." He thought of expressive gestures as diminished traces of past forcible actions. Gertrud Bing, "Aby Warburg," 300.
  85. Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, 273. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, "Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm."
  86. Warburg, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy," 623.
  87. He called Burckhardt and Nietzsche "highly sensitive seismographs." See Kurt W. Forster's introduction to Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*.
  88. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 355.
  89. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390.
  90. See Benjamin Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive," as well as his influential account of postmodernist art, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," and Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse." A comprehensive account of the cycle is Gerhard Richter and Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter, October 18, 1977*. See also Richter's Web site, [www.gerhard-richter.com](http://www.gerhard-richter.com). A thought-provoking essay is Peter Wollen, "October 18, 1977." For a collection of texts relating to art and the archive see Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive*.
  91. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

1. Clive Bell, *Art*, 17-18.
2. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 11.
3. This argument was first made, on a more purely textual basis, by Marshall Brown in "The Classic Is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History."
4. Vico, Rousseau, and Nietzsche all held views of this kind. The commitment to such a view is a substantially more important feature of the structuralist impulse than the recognition of language as a system that is often placed in the foreground.
5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.
6. For a closely related argument, see Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sharing Voices."
7. Wölfflin, *Principles*, 11.
8. The resulting model of the relation between "art history" and "visual culture" has interesting resonances with the view developed by Georges Didi-Huberman, primarily out of Aby Warburg's writings, in *L'image survivante : Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes*

*selon Aby Warburg*. See also Didi-Huberman, "Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the Symptom Paradigm."

9. The frequently noted "viciousness" of this circle is a misrendering of *vitiosus*—"empty." But of course the point for those committed to the disciplinary model is precisely that the circle captures something, renders an object. The argument here is, unsurprisingly, closely related to the quarrel between Panofsky and Heidegger outlined earlier (see chap. 2, n21).
10. The persistent life of this particular example is no doubt linked to its way of suggesting that such thinking itself amounts to dogmatic slumber.
11. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 18.
12. *Ibid.*, 17.
13. *Ibid.*, 13–14.
14. *Ibid.*, 14.
15. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, 87. Nancy's closing ellipsis trails off, as Kamuf notes, into the opening line of Stéphane Mallarmé's "Tombeau pour Edgar Poe."
16. And Nancy's remarks continue, as if commenting on Wölfflin when in fact he is worrying at Hegel, "But this completion without end—or rather, this *finite finishing*, if one attempts to understand thereby a completion that limits itself to what is, but that, to achieve that very thing, opens the possibility of another completion, and that therefore is also *infinite finishing*—this paradoxical mode of perfection is doubtless what our whole tradition demands one to think and avoids thinking *at the same time*" (Nancy, *Muses*, 87).
17. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, 149–50.
18. This "looping" of ancient and modern, early and late, through "north" and "south" is the grammar in which the question of "being German" is asked all across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Seeing this helps make clear why Wölfflin's book both repeatedly asserts and sets aside considerations, like nationality, that it takes to be "external"—only to return to exactly that topic in its closing pages. One will want particularly to catch the force of Wölfflin's antihumanism here: "With this is certainly connected the fact that, in northern architecture, formations were admitted which for southern imagination could no longer be understood, that is, experienced. In the south, man is the 'measure of all things,' and every line, every plane, every cube is the expression of this plastic anthropocentric conception. In the north there are no binding standards taken from the human being" (Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 236).
19. See Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*. In this context, also see Whitney Davis, "Visuality and Pictoriality."
20. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 20–21.
21. *Ibid.*, 21.
22. *Ibid.*, 21–22. The insistent presence of the word "sign" (*zeichnung*) in this passage is worth noticing. If language provides valuable analogies for Wölfflin's argument, it also has a distinct way of figuring within those arguments. The central reference in this

passage is to Velázquez's *Spinners*; Wölfflin's largely implicit account of the painting is interestingly continuous with Svetlana Alpers's reading of it in her *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others*.

23. The German text of the last few sentences reads: "Erst die Verundeutlichung macht das Rad laufen. Die Zeichen der Darstellung haben sich vollständig getrennt von der realen Form. Ein Triumph des Scheins über das Sein." "Lauf" here does not repeat the earlier "rollenden," and carries a distinctly more temporal sense; "umlauf," which Wölfflin does not use, would carry a stronger sense of revolution or rotation—"Only the becoming obscure makes the wheels run," perhaps. The English translator has omitted the next sentence altogether: "The signs of presentation have fully separated themselves from the real form." The word for "revolution" in the previous passage was the relatively unusual "Umorientierung," a word carrying more the force of "reorientation" than (political or intellectual) revolution, "turning about," one might say.
24. One might feel that something of this is given oblique expression in Wölfflin's observation that "even the roundness of the felly has lost its pure geometric form."
25. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 87. In her *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* Caroline Jones suggests a larger and earlier influence from Wölfflin but offers no particular evidence in support of the claim.
26. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 87.
27. *Ibid.*, 85.
28. "It is self-evident that there will be no special part for the power of judgment . . . since in regard to that critique serves instead of theory." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 58.
29. "Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, Modernist art would lack both substance and justification" (Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 93). This can be usefully considered alongside Kant's remark that the products of genius are exemplary in a special sense: "Since the gift of nature must give the rule to art (as beautiful art), what sort of rule is this? It cannot be couched in a formula to serve as a precept, for then the judgement about the beautiful would be determinable in accordance with concepts; rather the rule must be abstracted from the deed, i.e. from the product, against which others may test their own talent, letting it serve them as a model not for copying but for imitation. How this is possible is hard to explain" (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 188).
30. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 12.
31. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 93-94.
32. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 152-53.
33. "The flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness." Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 90.
34. Scare quotes: "quotation marks used to foreground a particular word or phrase.

- esp. with the intention of disassociating the user from the expression or from some implied connotation it carries," says the OED.
35. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148.
  36. *Ibid.*, 148-49.
  37. *Ibid.*, 160-61.
  38. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 216, 218.
  39. *Ibid.*, 191.

## CHAPTER FIVE

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2:806.
2. *Ibid.*, 2:806.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:523.
4. *Ibid.*, 2:806.
5. Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 19.
6. This chapter condenses, updates, revises and further elaborates portions of Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*.
7. I take the term "formal strategy" from Benjamin Binstock's lively article "I've Got You under My Skin: Rembrandt, Riegl, and the Will of Art History." My remarks on formalism and description are in response to Jas' Elsner, "From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: Some Reflections on Riegl's Concept of *Kunstwollen*."
8. There is a superficial resemblance between this positivist view and Baxandall's practice of inferential criticism, since he prefers the word "explanation" to "interpretation" and also attends to the processes of making in his account to works. But the "circumstances" that, for Baxandall, enable us to form an account of a work of art are certainly not reducible to materials and techniques.
9. Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, 19.
10. *Ibid.*, 26-27.
11. Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time," 60.
12. Alois Riegl, *Group Portraiture of Holland*.
13. I find Benjamin Binstock's argument, that the Syndics are looking at sketches of themselves and responding to Rembrandt as the artist they've commissioned, a little overelaborate and not convincing because the painting itself does not suggest this interpretation. In my view, one doesn't need to supply any definitive narrative. See Binstock, "Seeing Representations, or The Hidden Master in Rembrandt's *Syndics*."
14. Riegl, *Group Portraiture of Holland*, 75.
15. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 197.
16. Riegl, *Group Portraiture of Holland*, 82.
17. On the ethical dimension of Riegl's concept of attention see Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*.
18. Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel."